

Mr. President, This Isn't Russia

BY CARL T. ROWAN

IF SECRETARY of State George Shultz ever writes his memoirs—telling us how the United States got involved in Lebanon, say, or why arms-control talks with the Soviet Union went sour—he would have to submit his manuscript to a government review board for approval.

If Jeane Kirkpatrick, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, were to become a candidate for Vice President in 1988, she would have to clear her foreign-policy speeches with a federal censor who just might be working for an Administration she wants to throw out of office.

Or if, a few years from now, the retired Marine who was Commandant during our years of involvement in Lebanon wants to write a letter to a newspaper spelling out booby traps that ought to be avoided by his successor, a government censor would have the power to tell him just what he may or may not say.

Does all this sound absurd? Well, it is the real world of Washington 1984. Last year President Reagan issued a highly controversial order, called Directive 84, which among other things would impose *lifetime pre-publication censorship* on federal officials who have had access to highly classified information.

Small wonder, then, that Directive 84 has aroused a storm of protest. "If this directive had been issued under a liberal, Democratic government," one of Reagan's own senior foreign-policy officials told me, "conservative Republicans would be crying from the rooftops." The American Society of Newspaper Editors calls it "peace-time censorship of a scope unpar-

alleled in this country since the adoption of the Bill of Rights." Veteran NBC newsmen and former Voice of America Director John Chancellor calls the action "the most sweeping and dictatorial censorship directive in the history of the American government." The American Civil Liberties Union characterizes it as "a frontal assault against First Amendment values and, ultimately, democracy itself."

"No matter how pure the goal is," sums up Lucas A. Powe, Jr., law professor at the University of Texas, "there are some means that cannot be used consistent with our Constitution. A system of prior censorship is one of those forbidden means. If the national interest is harmed by disclosure, then punish those who disclose. But do not punish all Americans by subjecting thousands of their fellow citizens to a regime of perpetual censorship."

Broad Pattern. In all fairness, even the sternest critics of Directive 84 are not saying that the President deliberately wants to impose a White House dictatorship upon this society. All Presidents have insisted, quite rightly, that vital national secrets must be kept safe from unwarranted disclosure. What critics are saying is that this President, in his oft-stated fear of Communism, is trying to make the United States "more secure" by infringing upon traditional freedoms in ways that will in fact make America more and more like the Communist regimes he so abhors.

Concern has been generated not solely by Directive 84, but by a broader pattern of more government secrecy and less public access

to information vital to informed decision-making in a democracy. Consider:

- In October 1981 the Administration asked Congress to gut the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). This law, enacted in 1966 and strengthened by Congress in 1974 after the Watergate scandals, gave the American people the right to know what the government was filing about them or doing to them, their relatives and neighbors. It became a symbol of open and honest government in America.

There is evidence that America's enemies, including the Soviet KGB, have used the FOIA to get helpful information, and surely some refinements of the law are called for. But the Reagan Administration—acting as though it wants to return to the excessive secrecy that allowed massive abuses and violations of law by the FBI, CIA and other agencies during the 1960s and early 1970s—has been trying to limit FOIA's scope and make it more difficult and expensive for citizens to get information.

- On April 2, 1982, President Reagan issued an Executive Order on Classification that reversed a 30-year trend and made it almost mandatory for bureaucrats to put secrecy classifications on more documents. The order wiped out the requirement that some *identifiable potential harm to national security* had to be demonstrated inside the government before information could be classified, and it ordered officials

with any doubt to classify materials at the highest rather than the lowest possible level of secrecy.

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